



Before Glory



Sunday, June 7, 1863, saw what Major General U.S. Grant called "*The first important engagement of the war in which colored troops were under fire.*" The troops Grant spoke of were former slaves recruited into the Union Army by Lorenzo Thomas, Adjutant General of the U.S. Army. The engagement was the battle of Milliken's Bend, Louisiana.

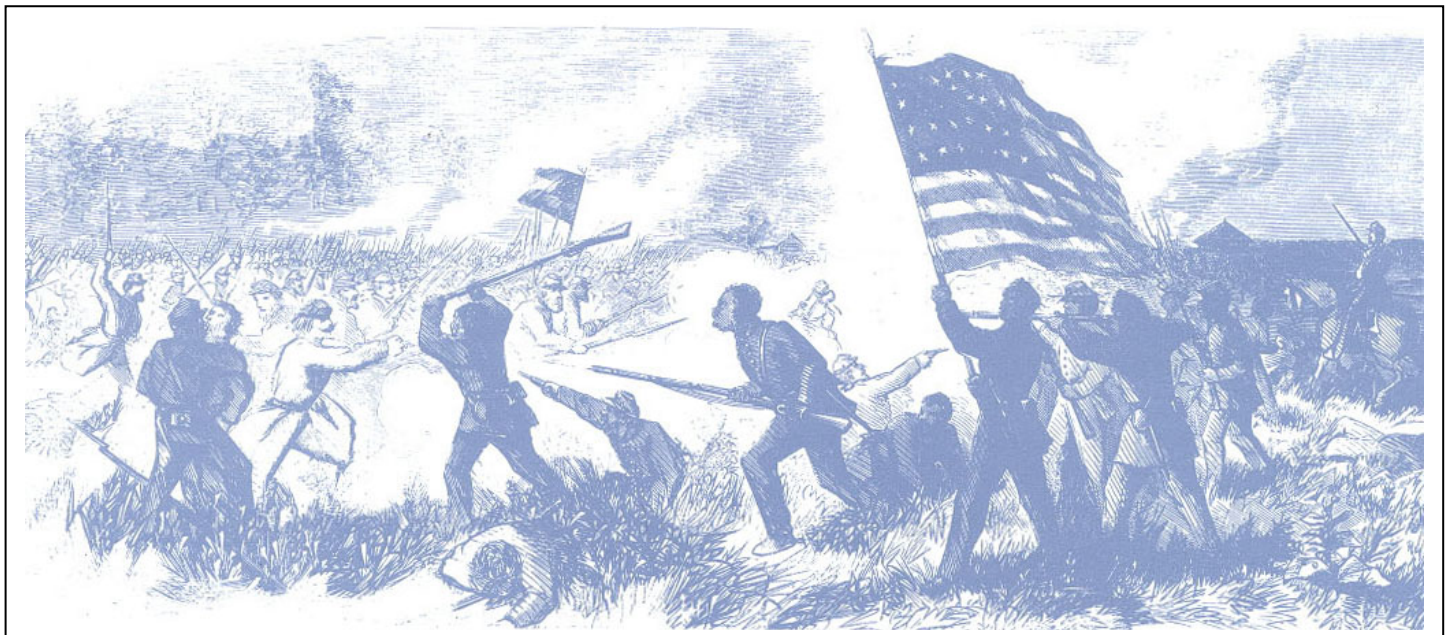
Milliken's Bend was the base of Grant's advance supply and communication line running south sixty-three miles from the Mississippi River above Vicksburg to Hard Times Landing below the fortress city. As the line was vulnerable, Grant ordered a road cut from Young's Point to Bower's Landing on May 3rd. This shortened his line to twelve miles and afforded greater protection to the transportation of vital supplies his army needed to conduct the inland campaign against Vicksburg.

Lieutenant General John C. Pemberton, Confederate commander at Vicksburg, recognized the need to destroy Grant's line of supply. On May 9, he wired Lieutenant General Kirby Smith: "*You can contribute materially to the defense of Vicksburg and the navigation of the Mississippi River by a movement upon the line of communications of the enemy on the western side of the river.*" He emphasized, "*To break this would render a most important service.*"

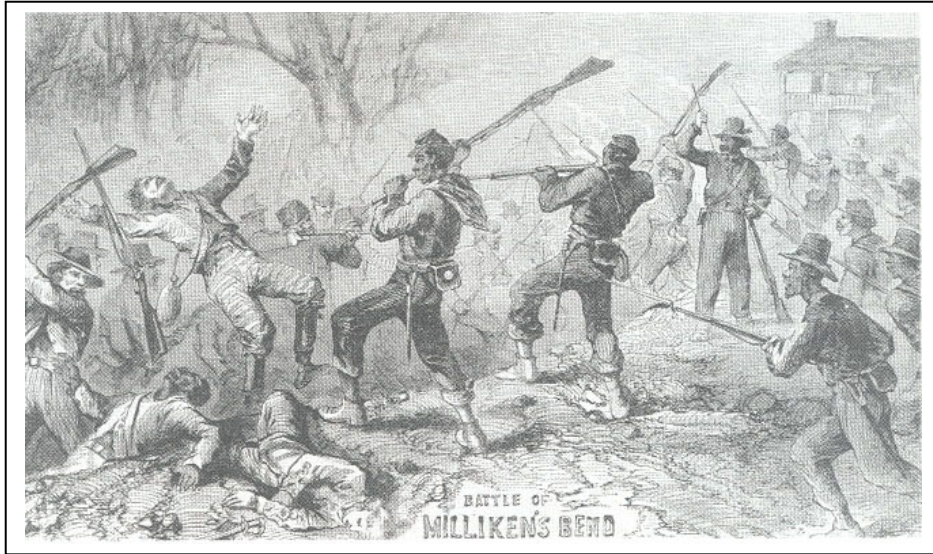
The Battle of Milliken's Bend

After the road was opened from Young's Point to Bower's Landing, and as the siege of Vicksburg progressed, Milliken's Bend decreased in strategic importance. Confederate authorities in the east felt it imperative that some effort be made on the west side of the Mississippi in support of the Vicksburg defense. Part of that effort was an attack on Milliken's Bend.

A brief encounter between opposing forces occurred June 6, however, the main battle took place on the 7th. The following excerpt is taken from the official report of Brigadier General Elias S. Dennis, commander of the Union troops at Milliken's Bend.



No Quarter!



"At 3 o'clock the following morning (June 7) the enemy made their appearance in strong force on the main Richmond Road, driving the pickets before them. The enemy advanced upon the left of our line, throwing out no skirmishers, marching in close column by division, with a strong cavalry force on his right flank. Our forces consisted of the Twenty-Third Iowa Volunteer Infantry and the African Brigade (in all, 1,061 men), opened upon the enemy when within musket-shot range, which made them waver and recoil, a number running in confusion to the rear; the balance pushing on with intrepidity soon reached the levee, when they were ordered to charge with cries of "No Quarter!"

"The African regiments being inexperienced in the use of arms, some of them having been drilled but a few days, and the guns being very inferior, the enemy succeeded in getting upon our works before more than one or two volleys were fired at them.

"Here ensued a most terrible hand-to-hand conflict several minutes duration, our men using the bayonet freely and clubbing their guns with fierce obstinacy, contesting every inch of ground, until the enemy succeeded in flanking them, and poured a murderous enfilading fire along our lines; not until they were overpowered and forced by superior number did our men fall behind the river bank, at the same time pouring volley after volley into the ranks of the advancing enemy.

"The Gunboat (CHOCTAW) now got into position and fired a broadside into the enemy, who immediately disappeared behind the levee, but all the time keeping up a fire upon our men.

"The enemy at this time appeared to be extending his line to the extreme right, but was held in check by two companies of the Eleventh Louisiana Infantry, African Descent, which had been posted behind cotton bales and part of the old levee; in this position the fight continued until noon, when the enemy suddenly withdrew."

Confederate Brigadier General Henry E. McCulloch paints a different picture in his official report. McCulloch's Brigade, made up of the 16th, 17th and 19th Texas Infantry, and the 16th Texas Cavalry, approximately 1,500 troops, had 44 men killed, 131 wounded and 10 missing compared to General Dennis' which suffered the loss of 101 men killed, 285 wounded and 266 captured.

Although the strategic importance of Milliken's Bend had diminished by the time of the battle, it was significant in another regard. It was a proving ground for the African American participants. It proved their willingness and ability to fight, and earned them praise from all quarters.

"It is impossible for men to show greater gallantry than the Negro troops in this Fight."

- General Elias S. Dennis

"The capacity of the Negro to defend his liberty, and his susceptibility to appreciate the power of motives in the place of the last, had been put to the test under our observation as to be beyond further doubt."

- Captain Abraham E. Strickle

"The bravery of the blacks at Milliken's Bend completely revolutionized the sentiment of the army with regard to the employment of Negro Troops."

- Assistant Secretary of War
Charles A. Dana